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Reshaping Cooperative Security Among Central American States

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Workshop Conclusions

Overcoming the Past

The United States has played a central, often confrontational, and inevitably controversial role in Central American security issues for over 150 years. This workshop took place less than three years after the conclusion of the war in El Salvador, less than five years after the electoral defeat of Nicaragua's Sandinistas and the U.S. military intervention in Panama, and while an insurgent conflict continues in Guatemala. The bitter struggles of the previous decade were fresh in the minds of all participants. Yet, despite the violent and divisive recent history, the tone of the conference was clearly forward-looking, with a minimum of polemics, dredging up of past events, or placing blame for current problems on one or another set of domestic actors or the United States. Instead, the focus was on future solutions, on possibilities for cooperation, and on building a tradition of mutual regional security which would benefit all.

Defining Today's Security Challenge

With the demise of the Cold War and its well defined threats, the region has to deal with many non-traditional problems that often cannot be anticipated. For collective security to work, all nations in a region must accept that war is no longer a viable instrument of policy to be used against their neighbors and that each nation's security is greatly enhanced if it can count on the support and cooperation of its neighbors. In this context, the United States can play a vital role, stimulating careful national security analysis and regional cooperation while being careful not to impose its own security agenda on the Central American nations. In this regard, Latin concerns persist over the presence of U.S. military forces in Central America--roughly 9000 in Panama and 1000 in Honduras. The concerns seem to be divided between the opposition to continued forward-stationing and the apprehension of economic, political, and security problems should U.S. forces be withdrawn.

A former senior regional official cited the issue of corruption as a threat to national stability and emphasized the need for solidarity among all elements of a society to meet emerging domestic and transnational threats. Civilians need to make it clear that they are ready and able to exercise leadership in security matters. Like many at the conference, this individual considered the gravest threats to be

internal, generated by poverty, environmental degradation, drugs, common crime, and, in particular, weak political systems. Of secondary concern are traditional issues such as maritime rights and boundary disputes.

Highlighting the traditional relationship between injustice and violence in this region, one Latin security specialist asked, "Why do we need a military?" He stressed that civilian inaction in addressing this question could undermine both security and democracy as much as any military action could.

An American with extensive experience in Central America warned against defining security so broadly that it loses its meaning. He pointed out that continuing problems produced by the arms trade, the persistence of para-military forces in the region, and the mixture of ethnic divisions, internal violence, and institutional failure threaten stability in all seven countries. The military, therefore, remains one of the region's most viable institutions. The United States, with its diminished presence, is losing its ability to influence.

Six Common Themes From Four International Working Groups

(1) Frustration with the United States. Central American participants expressed serious concerns over the past unreliability of Washington's support and the vague nature of the unfolding United States policy. They repeatedly discussed the lack of continuity and coherence of Washington's policies, the perception of bias in the U.S. treatment of developing nations and of groups within these nations, and the rapid decline in U.S. funding projects related to national security.

(2) Development of Stronger Democratic Institutions. Continued growth of democratic institutions is vital to Central American security. Both military and civilian participants expressed concern over the fragility of their national systems for governing and the danger that public disillusionment might lead to internal violence and the possible restoration of authoritarian regimes. While divided as to the extent to which civilian or military leaders and their respective institutions have been responsible for this fragility and disillusionment, there was general agreement that this detrimental environment poses a potential danger to both groups and to the state. There was also broad consensus that civilian understanding of and involvement in developing and overseeing security policies are essential.

(3) The Importance of Sound Civil-Military Relations. There is a division between those countries where the issue of civil-military relations is essentially resolved (Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama) and those where it remains a major issue (Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador). For the latter group, reaching a national consensus on meeting security threats and promoting regional cooperation continues to be hampered because of the absence of clear lines of civilian authority over the armed forces, the lack of popular respect for military institutions, and the blurring of the distinction between military and police roles in society.

(4) Agreement on Threats to Security. Before Central American governments can develop effective regional strategies for promoting security, they must realize the domestic consensus which defines the principal threats to their states. The dominant internal problems today were considered to be crime, corruption, and the influence of international smuggling of narcotics, weapons and people. Several traditional security concerns in the region, such as the insurgency in Guatemala, the possibility of fighting again within Nicaragua, and the spillover influence of conflicts in Mexico (Chiapas) and the violence in Colombia, were still considered threatening to some states. Efforts to establish a role for national military institutions and regional security organizations to counter such security challenges, however, proved to be very difficult.

(5) Roles for Security Forces. In responding to an increase in crime and its associated violence, including narcotics trafficking, military and civilian participants showed little enthusiasm for increased military involvement. There was, however, wide recognition that the severity of this threat, combined with the paucity of available resources, will require some level of military involvement for years to come. In principle, there was broad acceptance of the need to separate military and police functions and to modernize and enhance the administration of justice in all its aspects. The role of security forces in response to such actual or potential security challenges as environmental destruction, corruption, poverty, ethnic divisions, and lack of respect for human rights proved harder to address.

(6) The Future of Military Institutions. Little consensus was found in discussions about the future role of national and regional security institutions. The military side was afraid of a reduction in size and role to that of a "bonsai army," a tiny, largely ornamental structure bereft of the capability to effectively carry out its constitutional missions. Civilians were concerned about continued military autonomy and immunities, the need to develop more effective controls over the security system, and the impact of reduced budgets for all agencies of the national government. While all agreed on the need for expanded dialogue on these issues, it was clear that the wounds of previous decades would take some time to heal.

In summary, discussion groups were neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but determinedly pragmatic. There was no underestimation of the seriousness of regional security challenges nor the dependency on extra-regional powers for solutions to them. Regional cooperation was seen as important, but greater emphasis was placed on national efforts. Government programs to jointly educate civilian and military officials on security-related subjects were seen as having great potential. Above all, participants recognized that regional security, development, and peace can be achieved only by involving all elements in the common effort.

Policy Implications

While recognizing that future solutions neither should nor would come from Washington, participants made several suggestions for ways in which the United States could play a more constructive role in Central America. Among the most strongly emphasized were the following:

- Washington must remain engaged and foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. Its goals should include encouraging the completion of the peace process, providing expanded assistance in the administration of justice, promoting civil-military dialogue, and creating civilian institutions able to assume responsibility for security affairs.
- External assistance is needed in developing regional capabilities for peacekeeping operations and in dealing with transnational problems of the environment and migration.
- The coming departure from Panama (and probably Honduras) raised concerns about a perceived loss of interest in the region. The United States needs to place such withdrawals in context, insuring that they are not seen as abandonment or lack of concern with regional security issues. The U.S.-Central American relationship is based on perceptions as well as actions, and these must be understood and taken into account.
- International criminal activity demands greater cooperation within the region and from external sources. A better understanding of linkage between narcotics trafficking and other illegal activities is needed in order to avoid placing prime responsibility for dealing with crime in the hands of the

military.

- United States support for the democratic process and for improved civil-military relations must be more than verbal. Expanded International Military Education and Training (EIMET) and programs designed to develop government institutions and civil society are still inadequate. These programs need to be strengthened if the fragile, emerging democratic structures are to grow and flourish.

About the Workshop: "Cooperative Security Among Central American States" At a two-day workshop jointly sponsored by the Institute for National Strategic Studies and the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Inter-American Affairs in August, 1994, eminent scholars and civilian, military and law enforcement practitioners from the seven Central American countries examined the significance of strategic developments in the Americas which are reshaping domestic and international relationships across this region.

This workshop is the second in a five-part series looking at the possibilities for cooperative security in the Western Hemisphere. The author of this report is Richard L. Millett, North-South Center, University of Miami. For more information about the workshop contact: Col. John A. Cope, USA (Ret.), Senior Fellow, INSS. (202) 287-9210 x 530; Internet: Copej@ndu.edu.

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